

**STRATEGY  
RESEARCH  
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**MALTA: STRATEGIC IMPACT DURING WORLD WAR II**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

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No discussion of World War II is complete without an examination of the role that the tiny island of Malta played in the conflict. Primarily because of its location and proximity to lines of communications in the North African Theater, Malta became the most important base of operations in the entire Mediterranean. Throughout the North African Campaigns, the island repelled the Axis powers against severe odds and hardships. Withstanding the most concentrated bombing campaign of the war, the British airfields at Malta were responsible for harassing Axis shipping and providing invaluable intelligence to the British Admiralty. After contributing immeasurably to the Allied victory in North Africa, Malta was one of the staging areas for the Allied forced invasions of Sicily and the Italian mainland and was the site of the surrender of the Italian Navy.



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## MALTA: OPERATIONAL AND STRATEGIC IMPACTS DURING WORLD WAR II

No discussion of World War II is complete without an examination of the role that the tiny island of Malta played in the conflict. Primarily because of its location and proximity to supply lines, Malta became the most important base of operation in the entire Mediterranean.

World leaders, historians and strategists have argued from the time of World War II until the present that the entire outcome of the war rested directly on the fate of the tiny island. F.M. Hinsley, historian and military strategist, contended that the inability of the Axis Powers to capture the island was probably the single most important factor in the overall failure of the Axis effort, especially in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Mr. Hinsley emphasized, "the importance of Malta to the final British success in the desert and considered that by failing to capture it, Hitler lost the war strategically."<sup>1</sup>

Poised in the middle of the Mediterranean, the island of Malta proved to be an important strategic location. From this tiny island a power could control the lines of communication from Europe to North Africa and could also block the shortcut from Great Britain to her colonies in the Far East. The rich oil fields of the Middle East were strategically necessary to keep the Axis' mechanized, air and naval forces and industry running. Without the flow of oil from the Middle East Germany's war-making capabilities would be severely handicapped. Thusly Malta's ability to affect supplies and raw materials moving between Italy and North Africa elevated this island to paramount strategic significance. Had it not been for the Allied possession of the island and the resultant loss of Axis supplies, Rommel, might well have "pressed on to Alexandria"<sup>2</sup> in 1942.

Additionally, because of its location, the usefulness of Malta as a reconnaissance platform proved to be invaluable. Secret Intelligence Service agents in Tunisia and other areas reporting through Malta and photographic reconnaissance units stationed in Malta provided news of the enemy throughout the whole of the Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> These reports were the basis for much of the planning and strategic maneuvering of the Allied Forces.

The purpose of this paper is to give a historical account of the role that the small island of Malta played during World War II and the strategic considerations that forced the British to decide to retain control of the islands at all costs. Furthermore, this paper will analyze German strategic thinking about the small outpost and why such a thorn, in such close proximity to one of the Axis powers, was not eliminated.

### A Significant History

*As long as man has sailed the blue waters of the Mediterranean, warring races have fought for its possession.*<sup>4</sup>

Malta was first inhabited by the Mediterranean people. It was colonized by the Phoenicians. In succession came the Carthaginians, Romans, Greeks, Saracens, Normans and Spaniards.<sup>5</sup> In 1530 Emperor Charles V gave the island to the Knight Hospitalers of St. John. The Hospitalers adopted the title

"Knights of Malta." They distinguished themselves in 1595 when they led the defense of the island in the famous Siege of Malta by the Islamic Turks and saved Malta and its surrounding areas for Christianity.<sup>6</sup> The Knights of Malta maintained their rule of the island until 1798 when Napoleon captured it while enroute to Egypt. Unlike the German and Italian strategists, Napoleon had an appreciation of the island's importance during a campaign in Egypt.

Three months later a British fleet, invited and aided by Maltese rebels, attacked the French garrison. The French held out for two years before finally surrendering. After the French were expelled, the Maltese "invited" the English to rule their island. The Crown still maintained the island as a "Crown Colony" at the onset of World War II.

### **Limestone, Sparse Soil, Independent Spirits**

*On her face, the grace and dignity of ages; Despite the races mingled in her bloom;  
And in her womb the knowledge of the sages.*<sup>7</sup>

Malta is made of limestone rock and is poor in most resources. There are no lakes, rivers and only a few trees.<sup>8</sup> Although the soil is fertile, it is very, very scarce. Francis Gerard, the British historian, noted that, "in the old days, when the island of St. John [Malta] under their Grand Masters held the island for the [Holy Roman] Emperor and the Pope, they exacted harbor dues from visiting shipping in the form of great loads of earth."<sup>9</sup>

Agriculture was never a major economic benefit to the island. The Maltese farmed only as it met their immediate needs. Author Jan Hay who was stationed on the island both before and during the Second World War, recalled that the inhabitants of Malta depended for their existence upon a livelihood wrung from the ocean or from a quarter acre tomato and lettuce patch.<sup>10</sup> Gerard notes that the situation might have been quite bleak had it not been for the importance of the island as a port of call and coaling station. The commercial benefit of the island rose with the advent of steamships and large ocean liners. Most importantly with the opening of the Suez Canal, the British began to station an increasing number of military personnel on the island. These circumstances created a great many jobs for the civilian population. At the beginning of World War II, Malta's economy was balanced and stable, due primarily to maritime support.

The prewar government was similarly stable. There was no history of rebellion against British rule and there is no evidence to suggest that the Maltese were not generally satisfied with their political, economic, and social situations. Hay suggests that indeed the islanders were content if not happy with their lot as subjects of the English Crown. He describes the situation in this manner:

*Indeed the Maltese, although they have stuck tenaciously to their racial characteristics, take a curious pride in adopting British institutions. British currency is used exclusively. The first coin a visitor will use will be a humble penny for a ride in a giant elevator up from the quayside; the shaft cut in the solid rock that rises to the Valetta street level above.*<sup>11</sup>

The Maltese people did seem to identify more closely with their British history rather than their Italian ancestry. Both Hay and Gerard noted the contempt that the Maltese seemed to have for the Italians. In 1940, the headline of the island news paper expressed this attitude clearly:

"Hitler's Timetable"

- 1939: Poland and middle Europe
- 1940: Low Countries and France
- 1941: Ukraine and Caucasus
- 1942: Russia and Siberia
- 1943: Pacific and South America
- 1944: North America and USA

"Mussolini's Timetable"

- 1945: Filfoe Island<sup>12</sup>

(Filfoe island is the smallest of the little rocky spires that surround the Maltese islands.)

### An Island Prepares For War

*[Sir] Dobbie was unspectacular. He was penny plain. There was nothing of the theater in his make up save his personal courage. Even this was so quiet and matter of fact as to escape notice.*<sup>13</sup>

Malta is a tiny island. It is seventeen and a half miles long and eight miles wide and lies fifty-eight miles south of Sicily and about 180 miles from the North African coast. Nearby are the islands of Gozo and Comino. Meteorologically speaking, the climate is temperate. The prewar populace was probably as characteristic as the inhabitants of a peaceful isle could be. When World War II began, there was no standing army to speak of and air defense was nonexistent. The preparation for war and the maintenance of Malta was the sole responsibility of the British. Sir William Dobbie, the Island Governor, was a former military officer and commonwealth administrator. As governor, he was directly tasked to see to defense measures. P.K. Kemp points out that prewar neglect and early wartime priorities in other areas had left Malta almost defenseless.<sup>14</sup> One of Sir Dobbie's first duties involved clearing the island of the few Italian sympathizers. This job was relatively easy as it involved the jailing of one member of the law profession, a member of the clergy and a few "ladies of the evening." Members of the pro-Italian party were also rounded up. Lesser figures with suspected fondness for the Italian cause were exiled.<sup>15</sup>

One of Dobbie's most important responsibilities undoubtedly involved sheltering Malta's population from bombs dropped during air raids. This task, though formidable, was made easier since Malta was full of limestone quarries and caves that lent themselves fairly easily to the task of sheltering large numbers of people. In time he saw to the renovation of 13 miles of caves, old chambers and catacombs. An old railroad tunnel was also used as shelter. By mid 1940 there was shelter space for everyone on Malta.<sup>16</sup> Dobbie's attention to this matter contributed greatly to the small number of people who died as a result of air raids. Along with the need to shelter his population the Governor realized the need to strengthen the islands' defensive posture. In order to meet this end he mobilized every available Maltese man - all volunteers. Dobbie's air defense that enabled the Allied forces to maintain control of the island is considered to be his greatest achievement.

Governor Dobbie obtained permission to use three British Sea Gladiator biplanes that were found crated and unassembled in April 1940. The planes that were to become famous for their heroics against overwhelming odds were named by the Maltese - Faith, Hope and Charity. With no trained pilot personnel Dobbie obtained several British soldiers who volunteered to fly the planes. Malta's defense depended on an untrained ground force, an airforce of three planes and miles upon miles of air raid shelters. As ragtag as the defense forces were, by May 1940 they were ready to defend the island.

### **The French Surrender and Italy and Malta Go to War**

***Nowhere was the defection of France felt more severely than in the Mediterranean theater.***<sup>17</sup>

On May 10, 1940 Hitler invaded Holland. Two days later the Germans had secured major objectives in Belgium. By the 20th of June France had been defeated and on 22 June, she sued for peace. With France out of the war, Britain was left alone in the defense of the Mediterranean. General Archibald Wavell, the British Commander of Allied forces in Egypt, was left in dire straits. With France out of the war, he was left seriously undermanned. In North Africa, the French Army had many more forces than the British. General Wavell was left to defend the Egyptian border against an Italian Army that outnumbered the British almost three to one. (The Italian forces numbered approximately 200,000 while the British had only 60,000.) Although Italy had declared war on England and France on the 10th of June 1940 she did not make any moves against the British in North Africa until the French had been totally neutralized by Germans. Malta however, was another story.

***The period of suspense was brief. The sirens began to wail early the next morning, and the raiders arrived at 6:55 A.M.***<sup>18</sup>

The first warnings of an Italian attack sounded on June 10, 1940. Ten Italian bombers approached and dropped their bombs near the main harbor and on the airfield at Hal Far. Hay remembered: "From the point of view of moral effect their appearance was well timed, for the male population of the island were already on their way to their days work, and the women and children were left isolated at home."<sup>19</sup>

During the first weeks of the war there were constant raids, as many as six each day. The Maltese Air Force met the enemy each time. By the end of the first month of fighting only one of the small planes was left in any condition to fly. Four Hurricane fighter planes had been flown into Malta from North Africa and took up the job of defending Malta along with Faith, the remaining Gladiator.

By mid July two of the Hurricanes were destroyed and no additional planes were forwarded to Malta. Against such a weakened air defense, it is not readily apparent why the Italians did not press for the kill. Author Howard M. Coffin, a flyer stationed on the island wrote in his diary: Nobody to this day can decide why Mussolini didn't launch a total invasion as soon as he entered the war. There were troops on the island, but he might have easily overpowered them. Instead he preferred to wage a war of attrition from the air.<sup>20</sup>

Mussolini in fact reduced the frequency of the Italian raids and towards the end of the summer of 1940, two convoys from Britain covered by a small battle fleet steamed into Malta almost unopposed.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, British fighters, striking at Sicilian oil fields, and reconnaissance aircraft flying out of Malta did not seem to evoke an Italian response at all. The real challenge experienced by the Maltese was the difficulty in obtaining supplies. In Britain, the Malta Shipping Committee, (created to insure that necessities got to the island in a timely manner) was not formed until late September. Still, by November, two convoys arrived and supplies were replenished, Malta's troubles for the most part were temporarily alleviated.

By the end of 1940, evidence suggests that the Italians had squandered a golden opportunity to strike a devastating blow to the Allies by overrunning Malta. For sure, the island defenses were minimal and yet the Italians did not press for an immediate invasion. It was a local operational mistake that had intra-theater and strategic implications in terms of Allied versus Axis military strategy. The lack of Italian initiative also further eroded Italy's relationship with Germany. Hitler never forgave Mussolini for his blunder with Malta. The relationship of the two leaders was affected for the duration of the war. Author, David Irving noted that Hitler's anger was made manifest by his edict forbidding his staff from communicating with the Italian forces.<sup>22</sup>

### The Strategic Importance of Malta

#### *Malta is the key that commands Egypt. (Napoleon)*<sup>23</sup>

At the time of World War II Malta was in the center of the most important trade routes in the Mediterranean region. It controlled the water route from Gibraltar to the Suez Canal, at the choke point where North Africa is closest to Southern Europe. Just as it is today, the canal route was the shortest and most preferred water route connecting the western world to the riches of the Far East and more importantly, the shortest way to the oil fields of the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> Of equal importance was Malta's ability to safely base reconnaissance planes and other intelligence collecting assets needed to keep tabs on enemy activities in Italy and to monitor German movements in southern Europe, North Africa and throughout the entire Mediterranean area of operation. As an intelligence collection and dissemination platform the island was ideally located to pass and receive intelligence information to and from all over the Mediterranean basin by radio.<sup>25</sup>

Malta's ability to affect the supplies of the Axis forces stationed in the North African Theater highlighted its strategic significance in determining the outcome of World War II. It was an Allied refuge that lay within striking distance of all of the Axis' north-south lines of communication. When Malta was strong and able to attack Axis supply convoys, Axis armies suffered. Rommel's offensives were particularly affected when Axis supplies couldn't get past the island. However, when Malta lacked supplies and equipment to interdict enemy supply lines, Axis forces in the area were strengthened and usually defeated the Allied forces decisively.

Churchill realized from the beginning the critical importance of Malta and wasted no time

convincing any doubters. H.A. Jacobsen observed: "The British regarded the Mediterranean as the lifeline of their empire and their objective was to secure control of the sea and the air, and if possible, the control of North Africa as a whole."<sup>26</sup> Hitler, on the other hand never was convinced of the importance of Malta. He was concerned about the fact that Malta was severely hampering German supply operations in the area, however he did not recognize the long term effects the island could have on the North African Campaign. David Irving explains: "It was not as though Hitler intended to stay in the Mediterranean. This was Italy's Lebensraum in his view: Germany had no title to it — indeed, not only was its climate wrong for the Germanic races, but the south had always been a source of mischief in German history."<sup>27</sup>

Jacobsen explains further: "In any case, in his view Malta was not all that important, as he was firmly convinced that Rommel's new offensive could take Tobruk: then the Italian-German supply line across the Mediterranean could run under the protection of Crete to this harbor, so conveniently near to the front line."<sup>28</sup> Hitler also felt that, "the Axis should not deliberately deprive itself of the chance to inflict heavy losses in British ships, men and supplies that were always encountered trying to resupply Malta."<sup>29</sup> The German Navy Commander-in-Chief, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, the ablest strategist in the German camp, was the only high ranking official to insist upon the importance of Malta but it would not be until 1942 that he would be able to get Hitler to listen to his point of view.

#### **1941: A Halfhearted Interest**

The first Luftwaffe attack on Malta was a matter of opportunity when elements of the German Luftwaffe attacked Malta in early 1941 for the first time.<sup>30</sup> The German high command had given air support priority to Rommel's North African forces and organized missions outside of the immediate North African coastline were minimal. There were, however, raids conducted to reduce the amount of supplies and reinforcements arriving to the Allied armies, but these interdiction missions were usually carried out in the Mediterranean against supply ships and troop convoys.

The attack on Malta was not an attempt to do serious damage to the island garrison, rather, it was an effort to destroy H.M.S. Illustrious. This British aircraft carrier was the pride of the Royal Navy, not because of the damage it had wreaked on the enemy but because of the survivability of the ship against all odds. The Germans knew that to sink the Illustrious would have been a serious blow to the British morale. Therefore, the Illustrious was like sugar attracting flies. German bombers had attacked her a hundred miles west of Malta while she was bringing reinforcements to Malta's air force. For three hours the crew of the Illustrious repelled the German attackers as she moved closer to Malta. Around six in the evening the battle-scarred carrier was moored at Grand Harbor. She had sustained several direct hits but managed to reach her destination with cargo intact. It was not long after the Illustrious arrived when Axis attackers could be seen over Malta. An officer of the Royal Artillery described the first attack on the crippled ship: "Several times the Illustrious disappeared beneath clouds of spray from near misses; but the flame and smoke of her guns never ceased...The bombing was intensely concentrated but they hit the Illustrious only once, upon the quarter deck."<sup>31</sup>

The Illustrious was at Grand Harbor for repairs all of January 1941. The Luftwaffe continued to bomb her. The carrier left Malta on January 23, 1941; the attacks against her had not prevented necessary repairs and had not done any major damage.

The Luftwaffe, along with the Italian Air Force continued to bomb Maltese ports and at times the island proper after the Illustrious departed. Just as the attacks against the aircraft carrier did not seem to merit the Axis much success; the attacks against the island proper seemed almost haphazard and reminiscent of earlier Italian attempts. Another eyewitness describes one of the German raids against the Island as follows: "The Sunday raids were interesting and exciting. We had two visits from Jerry. Bombs were dropped in and around the creeks, causing terrific clouds of dust, flying masonry and iron. Although I did not see it myself, it was stated that a motorcar complete, went sailing over the top of us."<sup>32</sup> Indeed the Italian raids during this time seemed even more left to chance. An official British account recalls this incident:

An Italian Cant-Z 501 floatplane approached one evening at dusk. It flew around the island for forty minutes. Then a searchlight was exposed from the ground and the plane landed gracefully near Comino Island at the northwest extremity of Malta. Interrogation of the four members of the crew revealed that they had been lost and had just signaled their base to expose searchlights to aid their return. At this very moment one of the island's searchlights chanced to be turned on.<sup>33</sup>

By mid 1941 a second stage of German interest in Malta was evident. The Germans intensified their aerial assaults on the island. Mussolini and Hitler had come to an agreement and the Luftwaffe was instructed to aid the Italians in capturing Malta. Hitler also defined this second involvement of the Luftwaffe as an attempt to gain control of the air and sea between South Italy and North Africa. He wanted to ensure safe lines of communication with Libya and Cyrenaica.<sup>34</sup> In February, to comply with this new order, the Germans went for all out bombing and parachute-mine raids. They sent fighter sweeps nearly every day and in the course of ten days, all of the British Flight Commanders stationed on Malta were dead.

By late March nearly all of the air defenses stationed on Malta were totally destroyed or damaged so badly that they were no longer in service. By the end of April, Malta was reinforced with new aircraft and pilots and in May more reinforcements arrived. Bombing against the island increased with the arrival of the earliest reinforcements but the defenders maintained the ability to protect the island well enough to allow other resupply convoys to get through to port. Due to the German offensive on the Eastern Front the Luftwaffe was ordered to concentrate its efforts there. Due to this shift in priorities, except for an occasional Italian raid Malta was left unscathed for the remainder of 1941.

#### 1942: The Year of Crisis

*If the long way around to Egypt was secured, the shortway through the Mediterranean remained tightly barred.*<sup>35</sup>

Grand Admiral Erich Raeder had understood the importance of capturing Malta from the beginning of the war, and was the only high ranking German who seemed to have such foresight. The

Admiral envisioned the Germans swinging to the right, through the Caucasus and into the Middle East. Rommel, after beating the British in Egypt, would take the Suez Canal and sweep up through Syria to join them. Then, united, the Germans with their Italian allies would drive through Persia into India. With the Japanese coordinating their attack from the east, India would be impossible to defend and the Axis would build a wall of armor from Berlin to Tokyo. Raeder's plan would have relieved once and for all the chronic shortage of oil.<sup>36</sup> The Admiral felt that the capture of Malta was the first and most crucial part of his overall plan. Like the British, he felt that the island would be an important base for all operations in the Mediterranean Theater and that the capture of it would eliminate the constant threat posed by striking British naval and air forces based there.

On the thirteenth of February Hitler, pleased by recent navy successes, listened to Raeder's plan for the first time. Raeder's presentation was timely because Russia was frozen solid and a further offensive there was not immediately possible. In addition, the Afrika Korps, that Hitler loved so dearly, had been hurt by the sea and air operations against Rommel's supply lines. Approximately 60 percent of Axis shipping was lost due to Allied interdiction operations in the Mediterranean. The base from whence most of those operations originated was Malta. Now Rommel expressed much of the same sentiment as Raeder. In a communiqué to the Führer later that month, he had explained: With Malta in our hands, the British would have little chance of exercising any further control over convoy traffic in the Central Mediterranean... It has the lives of many thousand German and Italian soldiers on its conscience.<sup>37</sup> Fritz Bauerlein, Rommel's Chief of Staff had concurred, saying that, "until the air and naval base at Malta ceased to act as a constant thorn in the flesh of our rearward communications, there was not possibility of the situation at the front improving and therefore no prospect of capturing the Nile Delta."<sup>38</sup> Historian, Peter Shankland records that Hitler was immediately "fired by this vision."<sup>39</sup> He immediately set about planning for the capture of Malta. He ordered all long range strategic considerations to be subordinate to this strategy and he christened Raeder's idea "the Great Plan."<sup>40</sup>

The Axis powers began to attack Malta immediately as the German High Command made Malta a priority target. By the end of February 1942 General Albert Kesselring, the Luftwaffe Commander, reported that Axis shipping losses had been reduced from about 75 percent to less than 30 percent. He attributed the reduction in Axis losses to the successful missions against Malta. Hitler seemed to be pleased. Still without apparent reason, he gave into the desires of other Axis Commanders and agreed, for all practical purposes, to scuttle the 'Great Plan.' Instead, Hitler now favored a joint operation with Italy in order to attack Malta. This new strategy was named OPERATION HERCULES. Irving notes that Hitler always viewed the idea of OPERATION HERCULES with "scarcely concealed distaste."<sup>41</sup> He felt this way, Irving concludes, because: "OPERATION HERCULES was to be a primarily Italian operation and hence in his eyes predestined to ignominious failure....despite all of the arguments of Raeder he was returning to the feeling that the war could only be won in the east."<sup>42</sup>

In March 1942, over 5,700 sorties were made by the Axis against the island of Malta. Convoys in particular were viciously attacked as they neared the island. During this time Malta was bombarded worse

than any other period during the war. The only time the inhabitants of Malta could count on a let up was when poor weather conditions forced the curtailment of air operations. Luckily for the convoys weather conditions at this time were recorded as terrible. There were gales, torrential rains, electrical storms and low clouds.<sup>43</sup>

In April there were 2,159 sorties against the island and its harbors, dropping more than 1,870 tons of bombs.<sup>44</sup> The Maltese Air Force was particularly hard hit during this time. Airplane replacements did get through, but as they were being unloaded bombs immediately started to fall. The Germans planned many of the attacks to coincide with the arrival of the supply convoys as their strategy was to destroy as many of the replacement aircraft before they could be prepared for combat. In one day alone over 106 Luftwaffe bombers sortied over Malta. Within the three subsequent days, all of the defenders' planes were badly crippled or completely destroyed.

In May the island received additional replacements. For the first time in months the islanders were able to present a formidable and sustained air defense. Still, convoys coming to the island were hard hit and the Maltese were critically short of food and supplies. June saw Malta's situation worsen. Her air power was still viable but the food and supplies were quickly running out. The island was being brought to its knees and defeat seemed certain. It was during this month that Hitler's enthusiasm for "Hercules" really dissipated. German air and sea attacks waned and in July Malta got fresh supplies for the first time in months. Irving explains that Hitler's change of mind was due in part to his belief that the Italians would have difficulty keeping Malta supplied against Allied attacks even if they managed to secure it. When Tobruk, a major supply port for the British, fell to Rommel on June 21, 1942, Hitler was for once and all through with the idea of securing Malta. Rommel too had a similar change of mind. The Desert Commander desperately wanted forces - any forces scheduled to be diverted to Malta could now be assigned to his Afrika Korps for the follow-up offensive on the African continent.

Mussolini balked at supporting Rommel at the expense of suspending the Malta mission. He wanted HERCULES (the joint German-Italian invasion of Malta) to go on as planned. Hitler telegraphed his ally saying: "The battle Goddess of Fortune draws nigh upon the commanders only once; he who does not grasp her at that moment will seldom come to grips with her again."<sup>45</sup> The Italian leader was convinced. HERCULES was postponed until early September. However, July saw Malta getting stronger and German supply routes were regularly interdicted. In response, the Germans increased the intensity and frequency of their bombing missions to Malta, but the tenacious air defense inflicted considerable damage against the attackers. By mid July, German raids had stopped all together.<sup>46</sup> It might be noted that both Kesselring and Raeder opposed this strategy. They wanted to continue the aerial assault on Malta.

From mid June to mid July Rommel was advancing towards Egypt. Irving observes that "each mile lengthened his supply lines and shortened the enemy's."<sup>47</sup> In July, 17 percent of Axis materiel sent to Africa was lost enroute and in August 35 percent. By the end of September losses had risen to 38 percent.<sup>48</sup> At the beginning of September the Axis powers again stepped up attacks on convoys headed

for Malta. On Malta rationing was again a fact of life but the island forces were able to strike with even greater effect against the Axis shipping lines. Once again with an increase in offensive actions originating from Malta, Axis attention to the island heightened as October saw attacks on the island grow in intensity.

Rommel had been relatively quiet in Egypt for three months. Air and submarine attacks from Malta, striking at his supply lines, had curtailed his ability to proceed. As naval and air activity continued to destroy a greater part of Rommel's supply convoys, Rommel's African Corps grew weaker. As early as August he had started to feel the pinch. When he had made his way to El Alamein during August, he had done so with gasoline taken from the British. When he finally got to El Alamein on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August he was under supplied and outnumbered. In October, about a third of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean and half of its bomber strength was assembled in Sicily.<sup>49</sup> Still, the Axis attack on Malta was limited. There were only fifteen day alerts and fourteen night raids. Little damage was caused and Malta continued to be the source that decimated the Axis' supply lines.<sup>50</sup> At the end of October the British Eighth Army broke through at El Alamein. With the exception of the Kasserine Pass in February 1943, Rommel never commanded another victory in Africa.

Allied forces landed in French North Africa on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of November and Sicily was attacked by the Allied air forces by the end of that month. A large convoy carrying supplies got through to Malta during November and four convoys reached the island in December. For all intents and purposes the war against Malta was over. Hitler had squandered his chance for victory in 1942 in much the same way as Mussolini had in 1940.

### 1943: The Year of Victory in the Mediterranean

With the coming of 1943, the Allies could launch their final and triumphant drive against the Axis forces who were eventually cornered in Tunisia.<sup>51</sup> Starting in the fall of 1942, the Allies launched their final attack against the Axis' Mediterranean forces in Africa. Egypt was freed as was Libya and Tripolitania.<sup>52</sup> Two large convoys arrived to fully stock Malta in January and now the island assumed a totally offensive posture. Hay recalled: "From the beleaguered fortress, the island speedily developed into a base for whole time, round the clock offensive operations against Rommel and Von Arnim."<sup>53</sup> In February 1943, Allied offensives against enemy shipping heightened. Six enemy ships and four tankers were sunk or badly crippled. An offensive was also initiated against Italy by the Royal Air Force, now stationed in force on Malta.

By the end of March 1943 the grand total enemy tonnage destroyed by aircraft and ships based on Malta had passed the million mark. The Axis forces remaining in the area were virtually neutralized by the lack of supplies. In May General Von Arnim (Commander of Axis forces, Tunisia) and 200,000 Axis troops surrendered unconditionally. Hay wrote: "As I write these lines the church bells of Malta are ringing and people are dancing in the streets... .The battle for Africa has been won at last, after a see-saw conflict of three years, two thousand miles from the place where it started."<sup>54</sup> It was the beginning of the end for the Axis Armies. Malta, that tiny Mediterranean island had contributed mightily to the death blow.

## STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Malta's place in history was assured for a variety of reasons. As an island, Malta began the war with the sea - a natural barrier for defense - as its only benefit. Malta found itself at the start of the Second World War virtually alone; without able allies for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of miles. Also during the war, Axis attacks on the island were more than 160 times as heavy as the attacks on Britain. (This figure recognizes those attacks perpetrated by German air forces upon the Island of Malta. The attacks leveled by the Italian Air Force upon Malta were not included in this comparison.)<sup>55</sup> The duration of the air assault was also phenomenal. There were more than 6000 raids against the island in a two-year period. (i.e. an average of 8.2 air raids per 24 hour period; each raid consisting of at least two aircraft). One attack against Malta went on for five days, day and night, without letup. The total tonnage of bombs dropped in March and April of 1942 alone was twice that dropped in London during the entire year of its worst attacks. In one month 6,000 tons of high explosives hit the island.<sup>56</sup>

From 1940 until 1943 only 1400 inhabitants of Malta lost their lives. Proportionately, the wounded in Malta doubled those of Britain.<sup>57</sup> Still the casualties were not what they might have been given the nature of the fight. It was not only the attacks that the island suffered that makes this study significant; it is the suffering that she endured that makes her worthy of historical mention. Despite Axis efforts to render it inoperable, Malta was an invaluable reconnaissance base. The planes based at Malta spotted targets and observed enemy movements in Italian areas and as far away as Middle East and Greece. Secret messages were received at Malta and passed on to points a long way from Malta.<sup>58</sup>

The story of Malta is undoubtedly remarkable. The British efforts to protect the island from the massive German and Italian aerial onslaughts was characterized by courage and bravado uncommon even within the context of the Second World War. The strategic importance of Malta can easily be explained in terms of its geographical position. Laying between Sicily and North Africa, Allies could dramatically reduce Axis shipping and disrupt Axis lines of communications running from Italy to North Africa. There was however, another reason that specifically made Malta more important to the Allied war effort, especially in the Mediterranean.

It is easily argued that one of the greatest secrets of World War II was the Allied acquisition of the German "Enigma" cryptographic machine, which the Germans used to encipher their radio messages. With possession of one of the Enigma devices the Allies were able to break the Enigma machine's cryptographic code, and "were able to propagate the intercepted messages to their field commanders, and used those compromised secrets in a campaign of grand deception."<sup>59</sup> ULTRA, was the code name given to this program and to that intelligence collected as a result of the decryption of German communiqués intercepted via wireless. Within the ULTRA Program, Malta was one of its most remote and productive outposts. Perfectly situated to intercept of German messages between Italy and North Africa, the Malta station intercepted most Axis messages that proved to be key in the Allied victory in the

Mediterranean. Acting as a hub for other stations in the Mediterranean, Malta received intercepts from other outstations in the region and passed the intelligence on to Britain through Gibraltar. Some of the major events directly affected by Malta's ULTRA intercept activities are as follows:

August 1942-ULTRA provides intelligence that thwarts near decisive Rommel offensive

October 1942-ULTRA intelligence provides shipping routes and supply lines to Rommel

November 1942-ULTRA gives green light for TORCH

July 1943-ULTRA information prompts Patton to change landing points and avoid main enemy troop concentrations in Sicily

May 1944-Using ULTRA information, Alexander breaks through the Cassino Line

Malta assisted greatly and without equal in the success of British sea forces in the Mediterranean.

In the second quarter of 1941 the number of British ships able to operate from Malta doubled and in the third quarter the number increased again. Because of this base of operation the British launched an effort that netted significant results. Of course, with the heavy attacks of 1942, Malta lost much of its offensive posture. Still even a weakened homeport was better than no homeport at all, as can be evidenced in the case of the H.M.S. Illustrious. The damage inflicted on the enemy during the worst times of attack was formidable. In April 1942, the worst month of bombardment, antiaircraft guns at Malta shot down more than 100 German planes. This was during the month when for eleven days Maltese flyers could not leave the ground. In times of less severe attacks Malta's injury to the enemy was greater. For example, from the time of declaration of war in 1940 until April of 1941, Malta's mini-air force destroyed 96 enemy planes with a loss of sixteen fighters and eleven pilots.<sup>60</sup>

Malta continued to play an important role during 1943. In the month of February 1943, six enemy ships and three tankers were sunk. Two destroyers and a Tanker were crippled. This destruction was credited to the planes, ships and submarines that were stationed at Malta.

Of much interest in a discussion of Malta is the role that the island played in Allied and Axis strategies. The British recognized the importance of open access in the Mediterranean. Churchill knew without a doubt that his entire North African Plan, code named GYMNAS (later called TORCH) would prevail only if Malta survived.<sup>61</sup> Because of this recognition, the British leader conducted his affairs in a manner that attributed to the retention of Malta. Even at the risk of great loss of life and equipment, the British made a valiant effort to keep Malta supplied.

Hitler, on the other hand, simply never grasped the importance of Malta to his war effort. His interest was at best fickle and at worst totally foolish. This was evident when in 1942 the Luftwaffe had Malta on its knees and the Axis forces did not exploit their advantage. Mussolini's strategy was similarly exposed. He should have insured the capture of Malta not only because of its proximity to Italy, but its early capture (it was there for the taking) would have facilitated a successful Axis campaign in North Africa.

No discussion would be complete without mention of the inhabitants of Malta. There is no evidence to suggest that even during the worst of times did the people of the island throw in the towel. There was no record of internal discord or espionage. In fact all evidence would seem to suggest that

perhaps it was their fortitude, their willingness to make necessary sacrifices that enabled them during the worst of times to keep the would be conquerors at bay.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Peter Shankland and Anthony Hunter, Malta Convoy, (New York: Ives Washburn. Inc., 1961) p. 34.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 32.
- <sup>3</sup> F.H. Hinsley, E.E. Thomas, C.F.G. Ransom and R.C. Knight, British Intelligence In The Second World War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 19.
- <sup>4</sup> Shankland and Hunter, p. 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Comptons Encyclopedia, 1992 ed., s.v. "Malta".
- <sup>6</sup> Jan Hay, Malta Epic (New York: D. Appleton Century Company, Inc. 1943), pp. 203—206.
- <sup>7</sup> Howard N. Coffin and W.L. Rivers, Malta Story, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc. 1943), p.95.
- <sup>8</sup> Hay, p. 41.
- <sup>9</sup> Frances Gerard, Malta Magnificent. (New York:McGraw—Hill Book Company, Inc. 1943), p. 55.
- <sup>10</sup> Hay, p. 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Coffin and Rivers, p. 45.
- <sup>13</sup> Gerard, p. 132.
- <sup>14</sup> P.K. Kemp, Key To Victory: The Triumph Of British Sea Power In World War II, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), p. 93.
- <sup>15</sup> Hay., 35.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 35-37.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 46.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 47.
- <sup>20</sup> Coffin and Rivers, p. 46.
- <sup>21</sup> Official Document, The Air Battle Of Malta, (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1944), p.14.
- <sup>22</sup> David Irving, Hitler's War, (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), p. 128.
- <sup>23</sup> Gerard, p. 172.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 172.
- <sup>25</sup> Hinsley, Thomas, Ransom and Knight. British Intelligence In The Second World War p. 190.
- <sup>26</sup> H.A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, Decisive Battles Of World War II: The German View. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1965), p. 185.
- <sup>27</sup> Irving, p. 419.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacobsen and Rohwer, p. 189.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 189.
- <sup>30</sup> Official Document. The Air Battle Of Malta, p.40.

- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 32.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 25.
- <sup>34</sup> Shankland and Hunter, Malta Story, p. 39.
- <sup>35</sup> Henry H. Adams, 1942: The Year That Doomed The Axis, (New York: David McKay Co. Inc. 1967), p. 168.
- <sup>36</sup> Shankland and Hunter, p. 36.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>41</sup> Irving, 383.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 383.
- <sup>43</sup> Official Document. The Air Battle Of Malta, p.41.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51.
- <sup>45</sup> Irving, 399.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 396.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 399.
- <sup>48</sup> F.W. Von Mellenthin, Panzer Battles, (Norman:University of Oklahoma Press 1956), p. 57.
- <sup>49</sup> Official Document, The Air Battle Of Malta, 90.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 94.
- <sup>51</sup> Hay, 172.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 172.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 173.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 174.
- <sup>55</sup> Gerard, 181.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 181.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 183.
- <sup>58</sup> Hinsley, Thomas, Ransom and Knight, British Intelligence In The Second World War, p. 490.
- <sup>59</sup> Charles (Chip) Proser, "Secrets of War: The Ultra Enigma," 1 January 1999; available from [http://secretsofwar.com/html/the\\_ultra\\_enigma.html](http://secretsofwar.com/html/the_ultra_enigma.html); Internet; accessed 28 March 2000.
- <sup>60</sup> Official Document, The Air Battle Of Malta, 28.
- <sup>61</sup> R.W. Thompson, Churchill And The Montgomery Myth, (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc. 1967) 28.

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